

# Romanus

Mary Calmes

I

OF ALL the things I thought I would see on my drive home from the fire station, a naked old man stumbling down the middle of the road was the absolute last. Normally my response would have been immediate: I would have been out of my truck and over to him without even turning off my ancient Dodge Ram pickup. But I was tired—I had just come off double shifts—and so was not thinking as clearly as usual. I veered slowly around him, and he was framed in my rearview mirror before I realized what I was doing.

I slammed on the brakes, jolting awake, having been half-asleep behind the wheel. What the hell was I doing? I couldn't drive around a staggering grandfather and leave him all alone on the two-lane road. Firemen didn't do that. We helped people, even ran into burning buildings to get them out. We didn't leave people behind.

It was so late, or early depending on how you looked at it, but either way the old man should have been home in bed. Putting on the hazard lights, I grabbed one of the two thick wool blankets I kept stashed behind my seat for not-quite-this-sort of occasion and got out of my truck. Firemen carried all sorts of emergency items in their vehicles just to be on the safe side, and I was no exception. As I jogged back toward the old man, I grew more and more worried the closer I got. He looked really confused.

“Sir!”

He was looking around like he was trying to get his bearings, and when my voice reached him, he turned fast and snarled at me, eyes wide, hands curled into claws, baring his teeth. It was strange, and I took a step back but raised my hands to try and soothe him. When he lunged forward, I took several more steps back as he growled, swiping toward my face, trying to reach me.

“Please, sir,” I said, lowering my voice, making it soothing. “Let me help you. I wanna help you.”

His eyes were huge, the pupils completely dilated, and he was panting with his mouth open. He looked feverish and he was trembling, even though in the warm, sticky summer air, he should not have been cold.

I held up the blanket. “Sir, please, lemme help you... I really wanna help you.”

He closed his eyes tight for a moment, and when he opened them, I was struck by the milky blue eyes studying my face. I smiled at him with my brown ones, hoping that they conveyed the warmth everyone always said they did. After several long moments, he bowed his head as though accepting his fate. It was almost as if he thought I was going to hurt him instead of help him.

Slowly, gently, I put the blanket around his shoulders, stepped closer, and wrapped it around him so he was draped underneath it, covered up. I smiled wide and noticed his answering shiver. I gently rubbed his upper arms and stared into his face.

He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

“How ’bout some water?” I suggested, leaning close to him, easing my arm around his back, prodding him forward, back toward my truck.

As we walked slowly together back the way I had come, he withdrew his left arm from the blanket and curled it around my shoulders. Only then did I notice that he was bigger than me, taller, and when he leaned a little more heavily, I struggled for a moment before I found my stride again. I was used to carrying people, so I just had to find my balance.

After I got him tucked in on his side of the truck and ran around the front to the driver’s side, I explained that I was going to take him to the hospital.

He shook his head no.

“Sir,” I began, pulling a bottle of water from the small cooler I kept beside the blankets stashed behind the seat of my truck. “You need to be seen by a doctor to make sure—”

“No.” He shook his head. “Home.” He pointed down the road.

But I didn’t think he was in any shape to be making decisions. He looked so out of it. I made my voice soft, soothing, coaxing. “I think you—”

“No,” he cut me off the second time, again gesturing ahead of us at the pavement.

I pointed down the road and only then realized that I was nowhere near where I was supposed to be. I must have taken a wrong turn.

“Shit,” I groaned. I had to be on the other side of the mountain. Not that Wyndam, Kentucky was a big place. I

just had to double back and go down the road, and I would be close to Winchester, which was just half an hour or so out of Lexington, but still... it was late, I was exhausted, and now I was playing taxi for a clearly impaired old man. It was possible that he had dementia or Alzheimer's and had no idea where in the world home was.

"Home." He pointed again down the dark two-lane road.

"Okay," I sighed heavily as I put the Ram into drive.

After awhile, the old man starting speaking softly in French, which I recognized from high school but couldn't remember enough of to answer him back. The words I did get were "friend" and "good." When he reached out to pat my thigh, I smiled over at him.

"Fear?"

I glanced back at him before turning again to the road. I didn't want to hit any furry creatures skittering across the pavement. "Pardon me?"

"You... fear me?"

"Uh no," I said, grinning, "not so much."

He banged the dashboard hard with his fist, and when I looked back at him, his pupils were dilated again, and he was growling.

"Calm down," I soothed him, reaching out to pat his shoulder, wanting him relaxed, not flinging himself at me while I was driving. I did not need to end up in a ditch because I swerved off the side of the road. "Please, sir."

After a moment, his shoulders slumped, and he closed his eyes.

“That’s it, just breathe,” I coaxed, rubbing circles on his shoulder.

When he opened his eyes, they were pale and milky once more.

“There you are.” I smiled, and he nodded slowly, reaching out for my hand.

Old people, dogs, kids, they all loved me. It would have been nice if hot men did, too, but you couldn’t have everything.

“Romanus,” he said softly.

“Is that your name?”

He shook his head, put a hand over his heart. “Fabron Chaloner.”

“I’m Mason James.” I smiled wider. “Mace, okay?”

He nodded, squeezed my hand. “Romanus.”

I must have reminded him of someone else, but that was okay. “How far down this road, Monsieur Chaloner?” I asked, my eyes on the road.

When he didn’t answer, I turned back to look at him.

“Fabron.”

“Sorry, Fabron,” I repeated his name.

He pointed at a turn in the road, and I saw what looked like runes carved into a sign before I took the left down a dirt road. It snaked deep through a heavily wooded area, the brush so deep that it scraped along the sides and roof of the truck. After a second I realized how stupid I was being and slowed down to a crawl. I was afraid that if someone was coming down the same road to the street while I was coming

up that I would be in a head-on collision. Putting the truck's high-beams on, I stopped every few minutes just to listen. When there was nothing but the buzz of insects, I went forward again. After what seemed like forever, I came to a clearing, and the first thing I saw under the moonlight was a huge bonfire. There were several cars parked in front of the huge Tidewater-style home, the kind with the porch that basically wrapped around the house both on the first and second floors. Seeing all the people milling about, it looked as though Fabron had wandered off from some kind of gathering.

Parking, I darted around to the passenger side of my truck and started to help him out. I immediately noticed that he was snarling again, his eyes jet black from the pupils being huge and his teeth were bared.

"Should I growl back?" I chuckled as I reached in to help him out.

He didn't calm, but neither did he lunge at me as he'd done before. Instead he continued to softly snarl, almost like purring, as I moved his legs, easing him to a standing position before leaning him against the truck. As soon as I slammed the door behind me to guide the old man to the house, I noticed that we had drawn a few spectators.

"Hi," I greeted the gathered crowd. "Can someone tell me if this gentleman belongs here?"

No one said a word; everyone was just staring at me with wide eyes. *What the hell?*

"Does anyone know this man?"

“We know him,” a woman answered as she pushed her way through the group. “But we don’t know you—who are you?”

Like it mattered who *I* was. The important thing was the old man. “Ma’am, does he belong here, or do you just know him? I can take him all the way home if you just point me—”

“If I say I only ‘know him’, then what will you do?”

It was the weirdest conversation ever, and I was tired. “Like I said, I’ll take him home, wherever that is. I just—does he belong here or not?” I asked, trying not to sound impatient or irritable.

“He belongs here,” she said, her eyes searching my face, staring into my eyes.

“Well, he really needs to lie down, and I need to tell you where I found him, and I’d like to give you some numbers of people to call, because I think he needs to see a doctor.”

She nodded, her eyes still searching my face.

“Can I take him into the house now?”

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry... you just... forgive me.” She shook her head slightly, turning to look over her shoulder. “Deacon, run and fetch Raoul. Paulo, Rector, help our friend with le Grand Rouen.”

Two men came to take the old man from me, but he shook his head as they came close. They both froze as the old man gently nudged me forward.

As we walked I told him how careful he needed to be about where he went at night and how scary it could be on the road alone. At the stairs I had him lean more on me and

kept my eyes on his feet as I made sure he didn't stumble or fall.

Inside the house, I settled him on the couch before I asked one of the two men where the kitchen was.

"What is it you need?" The first man asked me softly, almost reverently.

"Just some water for him," I said my hand on the old man's shoulder.

"I'll get it." He smiled at me, his eyes absorbing mine. "Sit with Fabron."

I nodded and took a seat in front of the old man on the coffee table so I could look at him. He still had his crazed look, and I wondered why it hadn't stopped. Maybe being home made him really edgy for whatever reason. Maybe....

"Listen," I sighed, leaning closer to him, rubbing his upper arms, "are you okay here? Nobody hurts you or anything, do they?"

He shook his head slowly.

"You're sure? Because elderly abuse is something we've been seeing a lot more of late—"

"I assure you he is *not* abused," a voice behind me said.

Turning to look over my shoulder, I found five men and the woman from earlier. And while the woman and two of the men were dressed, the other two were not.

"What the hell?" I groaned, shielding my eyes. "What is this, like a nudist colony or something? Can you just put on some clothes while I'm here?"

Silence greeted my statement and went on so long that I had to look up to see what was going on. The two naked men

were gone, and only the woman and the other two men remained.

“Thank you,” I grumbled, turning to the old man who was back to normal. Cloudy blue eyes were staring into mine. “Nice to see that you’ve calmed down.”

He sighed heavily before he smiled back at me. “I had thought never to lay eyes on such as you, Romanus.”

“Really, it’s Mace, remember?”

He shook his head. “It is you who remembers not or knows not, Romanus.”

I didn’t want to fight with the sweet old man. “Are you hungry? You wanna eat?”

He nodded, and I turned around only to find that the woman and the men had moved in close and crowded around us. It was weird that I hadn’t heard them.

I tried never to assume things based on stereotypes and gender roles. “Ma’am, do you do the cooking here or does someone else take—”

“We had no idea he was even gone,” she cut me off, her voice shaky as she took a seat beside the old man on the couch. “Fabron....” Her voice broke as she started speaking in French, the words rolling out of her as she began to cry.

He soothed her, and when one of the men took a seat on the other side of him, I got up to make room for the third, stepping back so as not to intrude. They all took turns hugging and kissing him, which I liked. He was safe and I was relieved.

It seemed rude to stay, but I really wanted to talk to the woman about the old man. Maybe I would just leave her my

number. Looking around, I saw a desk in the far corner of the room and went over to it, looking for a pen and a piece of paper.

“Mason?”

Turning to the sound of my name, I saw the woman gesture for me.

“Ma’am, I don’t wanna intrude. I’m just gonna write down my name and number for you, because I really think you should have him seen by a doc—”

She shook her head as she rose and started across the room to me. “I assure you, Ro—Mason, that he will never be allowed to fly alone again.”

I had no idea what any of that meant, so I just agreed. “Okay, but I need you to understand something: he was really out of it before. And you see the way he sort of growls, and his pupils get big? Well, I think that maybe he has a chemical imbalance, or maybe you need to have a brain scan done or—”

“No,” she said as she reached me, her hand on my arm. “I promise you he’s fine. He will be well-looked-after, and he will never wander again.”

I exhaled deeply, rubbing my eyes as they started to water. “I just don’t want him to get hurt, ya know? He was out on the road all alone, and I worry that if I hadn’t been there that—”

“Indeed,” she said gently, smiling up at me, reaching out to put a hand on my cheek. “You are a blessing, more than you know... and my grandfather finding you is a miracle.”

“I dunno about a miracle, but he really needs a keeper.” I patted her hand before I stepped away from her, crossing the living room back to the old man now sitting between the two men. “Okay, so I’m gonna go, but you take care, all right?”

He shook his head and reached for my hand. I let him tug me back down in front of him, reclaiming my seat on the coffee table.

“Now don’t get excited and get all snarly on me again.” I grinned. “If you want I’ll come back an’ see ya. You want me to do that?”

“Yes, Romanus, stay.”

“Not stay,” I chuckled, “but I’ll come back. I’ll leave my number, and you can call me when it’s a good time, all right?”

He looked past me with pleading eyes.

“Mason.”

I turned on the table to look at the woman.

“Would you stay and eat something?”

“Oh no, ma’am, it’s so late, and I just came off back-to-back double shifts. I am beat. I think I fell asleep behind the wheel once tonight. I gotta get home before I pass out.”

“Well, then you should stay here,” she suggested, walking over to me, kneeling beside the table, taking my left hand in both of hers. “After saving Fabron, we must save you as well.”

I stood up, shaking my head, gently pulling my hand from hers. “No, I really gotta go, but lemme leave my number so you guys can call me.”

She followed me back to the desk, and I wrote down my number and passed it to her.

“What’s your name?”

“Oh,” she gasped, “my manners, my God... Gabrielle, my name is Gabrielle Chaloner.”

“You’re his granddaughter?”

“Yes.” She nodded, smiling wide like she was just so pleased with me. It was weird. Nice, but weird.

“Well, it’s been great to meet you,” I said, darting back around her to reach Fabron. Without asking, I leaned over and hugged him.

His arms went around me, and he squeezed tighter than I thought he could have, holding me close. When I lifted up to step back, both his hands went to my face, stopping me.

“I would you stay, Romanus.”

“I’ll come back,” I promised, my hands on his wrists as I eased his hands off me. “Now you take care and listen to Gabrielle.”

He nodded, and I gave him a last pat before turning for the door. Halfway there I froze as five men stepped through it, all naked.

“Jesus,” I groaned, putting my head down, hand shielding my eyes, “if you guys are gonna have your bacchanal or whatever, could you wait until the guest leaves?”

“Who are you?” someone barked at me.

“Wait,” Gabrielle commanded, walking around in front of me. “Let me explain.”

I followed her, waving my other hand for them to move. “Could you guys lemme... Christ.”

They stepped aside, made a hole for me to pass through, but I had to turn sideways so I wouldn’t touch anyone as I walked by. Outside on the porch, I took a deep breath before jogging toward my truck.

“Wait!” The booming order made me turn, and I was faced with a tall man striding across the yard between me and the house. He was naked, and even though he had a body that looked like it had been carved out of stone, I was not in the mood to ogle him. I was too tired to be turned on. “Hold there.”

“Seriously?” I asked him as he reached me, my eyes dropping to my sneakers. “Could ya let me go already? I’m sick of being at the nudist colony.”

“Pardon?”

I indicated him with a wave of my hand. “You, the others—seriously would it kill you guys to put on some clothes?”

“I—”

“This back-to-nature thing is annoying as hell,” I groused.

“Look at me now.”

I tipped my head back so I could only see his face and no other part of his anatomy. The dark brown eyes were locked on mine.

“I am Raoul Orane, new Rouen of the chasse here, and I would like to speak to you.”

“Okay,” I sighed, “whatever you just said, could you put it on hold?”

“I don’t—”

“Howzabout I come back when I’m not ready to drop into a coma and when you have clothes on, and we can sit and have a beer or something, all right?”

“Only a Rouen and his leons, his warriors, may speak in their winged state.”

We were both speaking English, but I was obviously too tired to understand what he was saying to me. “Sure,” I agreed, placating him.

“Look at me.”

“I am.” I sighed heavily.

“And you see nothing amiss.”

“Other than the naked thing, you mean?” I asked sarcastically.

He was dumbfounded, and I took that moment to get in my truck. When I had the door closed, I waved at him as I started it up.

“Wait,” he urged me, hands on the open window.

“I’m gonna pass out,” I assured him. “Please just gimme a call tomorrow.”

“Perhaps you would stay for Sacha.”

Before I could ask what he was talking about, a very pretty woman stepped around him to slide her hands over the door of the truck. I had no idea where she came from and was almost positive that she had not been there moments before. But I was tired, so I might have missed her.

A straight man would not have. In a short dress that clung to every curve and showed off long, shapely legs, she was gorgeous—just nowhere near my type.

“Hi.” I smiled at her. “Look out, sweetheart. I don’t wanna accidentally hit you.”

Her smile, so confident, crumpled, and fell away in chunks. And while that was not my intention, it made my getaway that much easier. If I saw her again, I would give her back the ego boost and tell her she was hot.

I drove forward, turned, and headed back toward the opening. The farther away I got, the better I felt, but at the same time, my body started sinking into the seat. When I jerked suddenly, I realized I had been asleep. It hadn’t been long, but it scared me just the same. I hadn’t even made it off Fabron’s or Raoul’s or whoever’s property it was; I still hadn’t hit the road.

I cranked up the air conditioner and forced myself to take deep breaths in and then exhale them out. When my phone rang, I answered it.

“Mason?”

“Yes,” I yawned. “Who’s this?”

“This is Raoul Orane. We just met.”

I chuckled. “What’re you doin’, checking to make sure I gave you a real number?”

“Yes, I was.”

I snorted out a laugh. “At least you’re honest.”

“You are a lover of men.”

Strange conversation but it was late, and I was barely coherent. Had I mentioned to the man that I was gay? Had it

slipped out for some odd reason? It wasn't my normal conversation starter. "Why do you think that? Just because I didn't think your girl Sacha was hot?"

"Yes, her pheromones alone should have put you on the ground."

Whatever the hell that meant. I grunted. "Okay."

"Are you making it home all right?"

"Barely."

"You put not only yourself, but others in jeopardy by your action. Are you not a saver of lives, Mr. James?"

"I..." But what could I tell him? What I was doing *was* selfish. "You're right. I'm gonna pull over and sleep a little. Thanks."

"Why not drive back? You couldn't have gone far. I'll wake you in the morning. Gabrielle will feed us all, and then, after much coffee, you will be on your way."

A home-cooked breakfast sounded like heaven. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had one.

"Please."

Where did he get off with the 'please'? "Mr. Orane, you—"

"You saved Fabron; let us save you."

I stopped the truck. "I'll have to go all the way to the road and flip around. I can't even turn on your little trail here."

"Simply back up. I assure you no one else is leaving. It's perfectly safe."

“But I don’t wanna interrupt your... gathering,” I said, using the most politically correct word I could think of. “And I didn’t mean to insult you earlier, I just... I’m tired, I’m runnin’ on fumes, and I can’t do the naked thing.” I laughed softly, trailing off to sigh. “I just... I need normal, you know?”

“Understood,” he agreed. “We will all be dressed, I assure you.”

“Aww, see, now I feel bad. I don’t wanna put a damper on your whole getting-back-to-nature vibe or whatever it is you guys have going on out here.”

“Mason—”

“Mace,” I corrected him.

“Mace, please, come back. You interrupt nothing; only by your absence do you displease anyone.”

It really was stupid to be behind the wheel. Already I was miles off course for home because I had fallen asleep and missed my turn. All of my normal tricks to stay awake—radio blasting, AC cranked up to arctic, windows rolled down—were not working.

“Mace?”

He was persistent; I had to give him that.

“Fine,” I relented, “but I have to be up early to get home. I’m building houses for the homeless with the rest of my buddies tomorrow.”

“I will wake you.”

“Okay, don’t let anyone leave ’til I get there.”

“I won’t,” he said gently and hung up.

I was surprised at how quickly I got back, and the realization hit me of how long it had taken me to go such short a distance. I really had no business driving.

Parking, I saw that the bonfire was still blazing away, but when I got out, lots of people raised their hands to greet me. There were smiles instead of the uncertainty from earlier.

“Mason.”

Looking up toward the house, I saw Raoul walking toward me with two very handsome men. They both looked about my age, one like he belonged on a beach in Malibu, baking under a hot sun, the other in an Abercrombie & Fitch catalog. When they reached me, Raoul introduced the two, but I was distracted, so I was barely listening. I think he said their names. I should have focused to shake hands, be polite, but I was too tired to do more than one thing at a time, and the third man I had noticed walking toward us had every drop of my attention. My vision filled with him, and I could barely breathe.

It was like he was moving in slow motion. I saw the rise and fall of his body as he walked, the stretch of the cotton T-shirt across his broad chest, and the tilt of his head, the confidence obvious. Tall, dark, and gorgeous. I couldn't help the indrawn breath.

Raoul looked over his shoulder and stepped sideways as the Adonis joined him, and even though my body was barely working, exhausted, and screaming to lie down, I could not drag my eyes from easily the most beautiful man I had ever seen: chiseled features, a jaw that begged to be kissed, pale jade green eyes framed with long black lashes, and thick

black hair that fell down the back of his neck and across his forehead. The man was breathtaking. His dusky brown lips were sensual and inviting; the urge to kiss him was nearly overwhelming. I wanted, needed, to taste him.

He missed his effect on me. In fact, he missed me altogether, more intent on Raoul and talking to him.

“I need to speak with you about Ciprien.” He was adamant. “Now.”

“Wait,” Raoul said slowly, “we have more important matters to discuss.”

“What could be more urgent than the subversive ravings of a mad—”

“Luc Toussaint, this is Mason James.” Raoul cut him off, looking back and forth between us.

The big man gave me only a fleeting glance, but his scowl turned me inside out. I felt my knees go weak.

“He—”

“Yes, another new initiate.” He dismissed me before turning back to Raoul. “Good for you. The chasse is growing just as you said it would, but I need to speak to you about Ciprien before he does some real dam—”

“This takes precedence over a fanatic. Mason is the one who found Fabron.”

There was silence, and I knew why I was basically holding my breath—I was worried that my dream man was going to evaporate—but I had no idea why anyone else was.

When Luc did the slow pan back to me, seeing me suddenly, really looking at me, I tried really hard for nonchalant.

“You were the one.”

I heard myself whimper, but maybe he didn't. Maybe it just sounded loud in my head.

“Are you all right?”

*Crap.*

He glanced around at the others, taking a quick step back as he looked back at Raoul. “I'm sorry I interrupted. I didn't realize you were in the middle of—”

“You're not interrupting,” I said, finding my voice, stepping forward, back into his personal space, and looking up into his sea-green eyes.

Luc's expression changed instantly. He didn't look surprised exactly. It wasn't that big. It was like he was seeing me in a whole new light. Not that I was complaining; the warmth that infused his eyes sent heat racing over my skin, leaving goose bumps behind. I trembled slightly.

He squinted down at me, like he was trying to figure something out. I stared back, unable to do anything else.

“Were you leaving?” he asked me, his voice softer than it had been minutes before.

“I just came back.”

“That's good, since you're barely standing.” He smiled, taking hold of my shoulder. “You should come inside and eat something and lie down.”

I stared up into the pale, clear green eyes... celadon, maybe; jade was too simple a description, more sage or....

“Did you hear me?”

When he bent forward, his lips were now so close to me that I could lift up on my toes and reach them, press my mouth to his and savor his heat, his taste.

He squinted, confusion crossing his beautiful face.

I let my eyes drop. I focused on the full bottom lip that I wanted to suck inside my mouth and nibble on. The divot under his nose was sexy as hell, as was the light stubble over his cheeks and across the jaw I was aching to touch.

“Mason.”

I met his eyes again, lost myself there.

“Will you come with me?”

Was he kidding?

“You look pale. You should eat.”

“Will you,” I asked, clearing my throat, “eat with me?”

His eyes darkened, but he didn’t smile. “Is that what you want?” I nodded. “Then yes,” he said softly, a bemused expression on his face.

I swallowed hard, my mouth dry. “Okay.”

He put his hands into the pockets of his faded jeans and turned toward the house. I fell into step beside him, lifting my hand again to shield my eyes as more naked men and women moved around us.

“Raoul promised me no more naked people.”

“He was true to his word; no one is naked.”

“Oh, I beg to differ.” I tried really hard not to sound sarcastic.

“I promise you,” he said, clearing his throat, “no one’s naked—you just can’t see them.”

“Oh, I see way too much of everybody,” I assured him, glancing over, admiring the way the jeans clung to his muscular thighs, how his sleeves wrapped around bulging biceps and triceps. He moved fluidly, totally at ease with his size. I wondered if after I ate I could get into his bed and if, after some begging, he would join me there.

Back inside, the house was now filled with people. I didn't see Fabron, but he had probably gone to bed, which was where I belonged as well.

“Come,” Luc said, taking my hand, leading me through the crowd.

His hand was warm, big, and callused. I didn't want him to let go. When we got to the kitchen, he tried to release me, but I squeezed tighter. He rounded on me, stepping in close so that I had to tilt my head back to meet his gaze.

“Who are you?”

I took a quivering breath. “Mason James.”

“Why won't you let go?”

I dropped his hand, scared that I had freaked him out. “Sorry. I usually don't—I'm just exhausted, so I'm not myself and—I'm sorry, all right?”

His brows furrowed as he stepped into me, taking my face in his hands, staring down at me. “Why would you need to be sorry, Romanus?”

I almost whimpered. “What does—what's a ‘Romanus’?”

“You,” he said simply, his eyes staring deeply into mine. “Where did you come from?”

“Work,” I answered, inhaling him, his musky smell, faint traces of pine and rain that clung to him. “Could you take your hands off me, please?”

“Why would I do that? Your scent tells me that you want me. Your body is aroused. It heats and you’re trembling... why would I release you?”

“Are you gay?”

“The word is trite—I love who I please.”

I released a deep breath. “Well, I’m gay, and I obviously find you very attractive.”

“Because you don’t truly see me,” he said, almost sadly.

I shivered again. “I see you, believe me.”

He let out a very male grunt as he eased me forward. “You look like you would taste sweet. Let us see.”

I lifted for the kiss, and he bent and delivered it in scorching fashion. The first kiss was usually tentative, gentle, the slow slide of tongue across the seam of lips, asking, hoping for admittance, seeking another tongue to dance with. The kiss we shared was anything but. Luc ground his mouth down over mine, and his tongue pushed between my lips, parting them fast as he ravaged me.

One hand behind my head holding me still, the other on the small of my back, sliding lower to cup my ass—the man knew what he wanted, and I pushed my groin into his hip to let him know the feeling was very mutual. Normally, because I was six-one and covered in lean muscle, there were not a lot of guys who could dominate me, make me feel like I couldn’t overpower them if I wanted. But Luc was bigger than me, stronger, taller, his body more powerful, his

muscles twice mine, massive in comparison to me. Having him hold me was heaven. When he lifted his lips from mine, I saw how glazed his eyes were, bright and shiny.

“So sweet,” he growled, his voice deep, seductive, hot. “So ready for me... why?”

Why did I want him? “Have you looked in the mirror lately?”

“No,” he said, sounding sad again, “not in ages.”

“Well, then you should,” I assured him, feeling bold suddenly, putting my hands on his broad chest, feeling the rock-hard pectorals through the thin T-shirt, letting them slide down the chiseled muscles to rippling abs. I could have traced the definition through the cotton, the deep groove in his abdomen. The man was put together nicely, and as my hands finally settled on his lean hips, I stepped closer, lifting my head to kiss the line of his jaw.

“You find me favorable,” he growled, his voice rich and deep.

The sound sliced through me. “Are you kidding?” I rasped taking several steps away from him before my body went up in flames. “I can barely keep from tearing your clothes off.” I coughed. “But this ain’t me... I’m not myself. I need to go.”

His gorgeous green eyes were back on my face. “Tell me who your parents are.”

“Jacob and Cecelia James.” I smiled at him, taking another step back.

He took a step closer. “You were adopted.”

My head snapped up. “I was—how’d you know?”

He edged closer to me. “I will find out your heritage, but for now you will come with me.”

I would have protested, but he took my hand again, this time lacing his fingers with mine. Looking at his dark bronze skin beside my own gold flesh made me smile. He was used to having his way, used to being in charge, and for me, who had always been the one to take care of others, I liked that a lot.

He walked me out the back door and across the yard to another, smaller house. I was pushed gently through the front door and into pitch darkness. I had a second of fear before the lights went on, and I was facing a very rustic setting: fireplace, big rug in front of it, leather furniture, small butcher block table in one corner, kitchen in another, and a doorway that looked like it led to a hall. There were windows everywhere that gave it a light, airy feeling.

“Your house is nice, really warm,” I told him.

“I agree,” he growled as he stepped in close to me, the back of his knuckles sliding up my throat to lift my chin so he could see my eyes. “Tell me, are your parents still living?”

“No,” I said sadly, grief overwhelming passion suddenly. I took a step back, walking to his couch and flopping down on it. “They died when I was sixteen. In a car accident.”

He moved fast, faster than maybe he should have been able to, and knelt in front of me, hands on my thighs, staring into my face. “I’m sorry, Mason, very sorry.”

I reached out and put my hands on his face, liking the compassion I saw in his eyes almost as much as the wicked gleam that had been there before. “It was a long time ago.”

He leaned sideways and swept my legs up onto the couch so that I was lying down, my head on a pillow, staring up at him. I couldn't resist reaching out to touch the chiseled jaw. When his hand covered mine, I released a deep breath.

"I'm so out of it." I smiled at him.

He nodded. "The other men... Raoul brought them for you, to tempt you to stay."

"What men?" I tried to think, because really, who was more tempting than Luc?

"They are both beautiful."

"You're beautiful," I countered without thinking, the words rolling out of me.

The smile curved just the corner of his dark lips. "I am a beast, but in your eyes I am not. What a wonder you are."

"Oh yeah," I snorted out a laugh, "I'm a winner all right. That's why I can't have a relationship to save my life."

His expression as he looked at me made me want to kick myself. Self-deprecation when you wanted to impress someone was really not a good idea. Story of my life. I over-shared.

"I just meant that I don't always—"

"You didn't trust them," he told me, "because they are not your kind. This is why you have no mate. You fear their desire to cage you when you know that to be tied to another who is not your kind, not *goji*, would be a mistake—as it would be."

I was only half-listening. What had all my focus was his right hand on my knee.

“Even though you have no clue what you are, your heart and your body know.”

My heart was not involved at this point, but my body was on full alert.

“A human lover cannot satisfy you or hope to make you theirs. Only one of your own kind knows what you need.”

My kind? “Oh yeah? What do I need?” I asked even as I felt my cock stir, lengthen, and strain against my cotton briefs, push against the zipper of my jeans.

“You need to join with one of your own,” he told me as his hand slid to the middle of my thigh. “In your heart you know this.”

Again, my heart was not my concern at the moment. All my focus was on my very needy cock. I could barely breathe.

When his hand lifted instead of sliding, coming to rest at the base of my throat and not on the top button of my jeans, my groan of protest was loud.

“Your pulse is racing.”

I bet it was.

“Lie here and rest while I get you something to eat.”

I didn’t want to eat, but before I could tell him that, stop him from moving, make him an offer he couldn’t resist, he was up and halfway to the door. “Crap.”

“Mason?”

“Never mind,” I grumbled, hearing the screen door creak shut behind him. Minutes later, the quiet, the warm breeze, the scent of charcoal and wildflowers, the chirp of crickets, the way I sank down into the couch was all too much for me. I didn’t even remember closing my eyes.

II

THE growling woke me. Not because I was scared. I was asleep so I couldn't be scared. The growling woke me because it was so loud and irritating.

Blinking several times, trying to figure out where I was, I glanced at the diving watch on my left wrist and realized that instead of the hours it felt like I had slept, only minutes had gone by, fifteen, twenty at most. The snarl drew my attention to the open window. With the moon shining in from the outside, it was easy to see that there was nothing there. Maybe the sound was all in my head.

When a shadow blocked the light as it passed by, I rolled off the couch and hit the floor. *What the hell?* There was something or someone out there, and whatever it was was now scratching along the outside of the wall, walking the length of the porch.

I heard movement, creaking. Something scraped over the wood and hit the wall. Standing up, I rubbed my eyes to clear them and looked toward the window by the front door. I wasn't scared, certain when I heard the heavy footsteps that I was about to face a man, not an animal. There were no large predators in Kentucky anyway, certainly not wolves or bears or cougars.

The loud bang on the front door startled me, and I was struck by the thought that it should have been torn off its

hinges. Surely the wood, as hard as it was, could not have survived the blow it took to create such a powerful noise. The second sound, following in a matter of seconds, was the crash of glass as a fist came through the wood, splintering as it retreated. When the door fell forward into the room, I released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. My surprise was fleeting as I found myself looking at a man, a large naked man.

His eyes were glassy with pupils that were completely dilated, and he was shivering just as Fabron had been, even though it was still hot outside.

"What are you doing here?" I asked as the man growled at me, baring his teeth, his hands curled into claws.

He made a face, his lips drawing back in a snarl, eyes widening, lifting his hands like he was about to strike me. As tired as I was, I acted without thinking. Lunging forward, I caught his chin with the heel of my hand, snapping his head back and shoving him hard, which upset his balance enough to allow me to push him over the porch railing down into the flower bed. I was surprised by how quickly he rose, turned, and flew at me. It seemed like a blur of speed; one minute he was in the dirt, the next he was attacking me. I dodged out of his way, and he went tumbling through the window behind me into the house.

Adrenaline, I decided in that moment, would get me home. If not all the way home, then definitely to my friend David's place in Nicholasville. I bolted off the porch and ran around the larger house, came crashing through some people still milling around the bonfire, and skidded to a stop beside my pickup. Pulling out my keys, I was in it and

moving, my truck fishtailing in the dirt, sending up a cloud of dust before I stomped on the gas pedal and hurtled down the road. No matter how hot Luc was, it was not worth my sanity. Naked, growling people were not my idea of fun.

When my phone rang minutes later with no caller ID, I let it go to voice mail. I was not in the mood to talk. I simply had to focus on the road and getting all the way home in one piece.

III

“THEY were all naked?” Finn Garret, my roommate, was asking me three nights later. His expressive blue eyes were locked on me, huge and round.

“I knew that was the part you would fixate on.” I groaned, getting up to go the refrigerator to grab another beer.

“I’m just saying that the things you think are problems are more of advantages for the rest of us.”

I should have known better than to look for sympathy from a hedonist. “It was weird, and I don’t do weird.”

He arched an eyebrow at me. “I’m sorry, did you just say you ‘don’t do weird’?”

I flipped him off.

“Really?”

I ignored him. Or tried to.

“Mace, everybody in your life is weird, especially the men.”

“You would know.” I smirked at him.

“No, no, I’m not talking about friends. I’m talking about lovers.”

“Who’s talking about—”

“I am. You said you ‘don’t do weird’, and I’m telling you that at least with guys that’s all you do.”

The look I shot him would have made a lesser man’s balls shrivel up.

“C’mon, try and name one guy you’ve screwed in the last year that hasn’t turned out to be a psychopath.”

I tried to think of a name as I stuffed a wedge of lime into the neck of the Corona before taking my first sip.

“Uh-huh.” Even his grunt was sarcastic.

“Wait.” There had to be one.

“And maybe they don’t start weird—I’m not sayin’ that—but they sure get that way fast. I mean, you go from casually dating some guy to having him stalk you in, like, days.”

“That’s not true.”

“That’s not true? Are you kidding?”

It was true, and we both knew it. Men got possessive of me fast, too fast. Usually after the first time we went to bed, they didn’t want to leave. And while it used to be flattering, I now saw it for what it was: psychotic. Having guys think I was great in bed was one thing, having them profess their undying devotion after just one night was a whole different ballgame.

“You had to go to the police about that guy Rick.”

Rick Meyers had not listened when I told him I needed air, space, and time apart, and so when he was suddenly everywhere I was, even there on the fringe of onlookers when I was working, in the crowd while I was doing my fireman thing and putting out fires, I had gotten a restraining order.

“Face it: you’re a freak magnet.”

“I’m not a... I just tend to—”

“Freak magnet,” he sang to me, patting my face.

“Hello!”

Turning, I saw several friends coming into the apartment I shared with my two roommates, carrying various containers of alcohol. Whenever we had parties, we left the front door open all night so people could come and go. Tonight all our neighbors on the fourth floor, which included three other lofts besides ours, were partying with us as well. Finn and our third roommate, Eli Pierce, had been planning the Friday night summer blowout for weeks. I had forgotten about it and was off work purely by chance. I planned to retire to my bedroom as soon as the festivities got going. I was not in the mood for drunken debauchery.

“The keg is here!” Eli yelled as he walked in the door.

I helped him bring it in and set it up, and an hour later, when it was discovered that they had nowhere near enough cups or ice or food, I agreed to go the store and pick everything up. I wasn’t hosting, so I was expendable.

A half an hour later, as I was loading up the car in the supermarket parking lot, the roar of an engine startled me. When I looked up, it was like every fantasy I’d ever had was fulfilled in that one moment.

Luc Toussaint was sitting on a silver Harley wearing a black leather motorcycle jacket and the tightest jeans I had ever seen. The boots were hot, the tight T-shirt that clung to every muscle in his chest made my mouth water, and his heavy-lidded green eyes were absolutely molten. As he sat back, he gestured to me. I stepped forward, and his eyes locked on mine before he smiled.

“Get on.”

“Hello to you too.” I smiled at him. “What’re you doing here?”

The wicked glint in his eyes made my stomach flip over. “I came to see you.”

“Yeah, but how’dya know where to find me?”

“I looked.”

Rational, logical answer. “Did you?”

“Yes, I did.”

I was unable to tear my eyes away from him yet again: black hair kicked out on the sides and in back, the pale jade-colored eyes, his chiseled features, and that dark mouth... I felt the air rush from my lungs.

“Leave your truck and get on,” he demanded for the second time.

“I can’t,” I said wistfully. “I have to drag all this crap home.”

“Can I follow you?”

“We’re having a party at my place.”

“Please.”

I was embarrassed and shoved my hands down into the pockets of my jeans and walked over to him. “I’m really sorry for how—”

“You were attacked and so had to defend yourself,” he said, his voice suddenly icy. “I should have never left you alone for others to test—that was my mistake. I assure you I will not make it again.”

“What does that mean?”

“May I see you?”

*Oh yes, please!* “How do you mean?” I asked, clearing my throat.

“I would like to spend time with you, if you’ll let me.”

He wanted my permission. “Sure,” I said as nonchalantly as I could.

The way his eyes glowed—like he was just so pleased—made my breath catch. “I’ll follow you.”

All the way home, I kept an eye on him in my rearview mirror. When I took the shortcut through the park, he cut in front of me and stopped. I had to slam on the brakes so I wouldn’t kill him. I was going to rip him a new one since he’d taken ten years off my life, but when he opened the passenger door of my truck and slid into the seat, I was too surprised.

“What’re you...?” But my voice died when his left hand slid up my leg from knee to thigh and then back. I felt that telltale throb inside, the catch of breath, that hum of pleasure. I imagined his fingers sliding over my cock, envisioned them sliding inside me, and it was all I could do not to attack him. The man had filled every dream I’d had since I met him, and now he was close enough to kiss. It was overwhelming. And his hands... the roped veins, the long delicate fingers, those digits of his would feel amazing. I trembled just thinking about it and sat up a little straighter to put some kind of distance between us.

“You haunt my dreams,” he said as he leaned in close, his hand sliding around the back of my neck. “Kiss me.”

*He had been dreaming about me too?*

“Please.”

I stared at his face, saw that there were black flecks in those green eyes, and they were framed with lashes that women I knew would have killed to have: long, thick and curling.

He made a noise in the back of his throat, and he sounded like he was in pain.

“Luc?”

“Please,” almost a whimper coming out of him as he slid the back of his fingers up my throat and then cupped my chin before gently touching my cheek, running his thumb over my bottom lip. The other hand settled on my face as he stared into my eyes. “One kiss.”

I stared at his mouth, and when he bit his bottom lip, I could not resist. I reached for him, and he moved fast, sealing his mouth to mine, inhaling me at the same time. I felt the kiss like an electrical current running through me, and sizzling heat pooled in my groin. His long, talented tongue stroking and licking, his lips sucking and biting, the furnace that was his mouth overwhelmed me. I had to push back to get air.

As I gasped, his hands were on my belt buckle, and I heard the jingle as it was opened before the top button on my jeans and the zipper.

“Luc,” I whimpered, praying he wasn’t about to stop whatever he had planned.

He was rough as he shucked down my jeans, baring my ass before I was yanked forward across the leather seat.

Hands on the back of my thighs, he folded me in half as his tongue slid between my cheeks, licking over my crease.

“Oh God, please.”

I bucked in his grip as his hands opened me up, spreading me, the first graze of his tongue over my hole making me clutch at his shoulders, release a hoarse moan of pleasure. It was crazy and wild—we were outside in the park, anyone could discover us, and I could not have cared. There was only his tongue as it slid deep inside, the rimming no one had ever done before, pushing saliva so far into me, making my channel slick and wet and dripping. When I was panting and writhing with his efforts, I begged for his cock, begged him to fill me, fuck me.

His tongue slid from my hole, impossibly sheathed, and two of his fingers filled my ass as his mouth closed over my hard, leaking shaft.

“Luc!” I yelled his name as my back bowed, and I impaled myself on him at the same time he swallowed the length of me down his throat. The third finger added to the others curling up inside me made my balls draw up tight, my body stilling as my orgasm began to build.

“Your body burns for me.”

“Yes... please.” I pointed to the glove compartment. “The condoms... there.”

“No,” he growled, and the door was open, and I was pulled outside, lifted easily, suddenly over the truck, looking down at it from twenty feet above before falling with him through the air into the bed.

“Wait,” I panted as he spun me around, fisting my cock as he bit down into my right shoulder. It felt so good. “Luc.” I trembled in his arms. “How did you—we—?”

“This is a gamble for me,” he said as I felt the head of his cock pressed to my entrance. “Once we’re joined you will truly see me, and the terror may overwhelm you, and you will banish me from your sight. As I have chosen to mate with a descendant of Romain, then I shall have no other but you, and if you will not have me, I will be alone until the end of my days.”

I had no idea what he was talking about, was still reeling from what I thought I saw seconds before, but how could he ever dream that I would not want him?

“Will you take me in?”

“We need a—”

“We need nothing, I swear to you. Give your permission fast, for my body yearns to be joined with yours.”

It was insane, but I had never felt anything like the pounding need in me, the throb of desire that was trying to claw its way out of my body. “Yes... please.”

With how strong and powerful he was, I expected him to bury himself inside me in one hard thrust, but instead, he eased slowly in, gently pushing, stretching, the ring of muscle giving easily after the long, delicious, deep rimming, and my body swallowed him.

“Mason,” he breathed my name as one hand tangled in my hair, yanking my head back as the other slid quickly over my shaft, milking me hard and fast.

He lifted me to my feet only to shove me facedown over the roof of the truck, the thick, hard length of him easing out before plowing back deep inside.

“Harder,” I begged him, and as he slid free only to plunge back in again to the hilt, buried in my ass, the growl tore from my throat. “Fuck me harder.”

His answering moan sounded like he was in pain.

“Please!”

“Tell me you will keep me,” he panted, lifting me off my feet which each hammering thrust.

Why were we talking? Was there a coherent answer to be given? “Yes, I’ll keep you.”

Clutching me to his chest, his arms wrapped around me as he plunged in so hard and deep that his name roared out of me. The orgasm filled me, overwhelmed me, and left me panting for breath, shivering in his embrace, my muscles contracting, bearing down on him, and holding him tight inside.

“Mason.” My name was a raspy whisper as I felt the warmth flood me, fill me, the hug turning tender, his lips pressed to the side of my neck. “In time, you will be mine.”

And the most amazing thing happened, I wasn’t scared. I didn’t think it was crazy, because unlike every other man I’d ever been with, he didn’t sound desperate or needy or frantic. “In time,” he’d said... like a normal amount, like he wanted to see me. Like at this moment, we could start. I felt so good, and when he chuckled, a deep rumbling sound, it filled me with happiness.

“But first we must get you to your party before your beer gets cold.”

I turned to look at him, and he wagged his thick black eyebrows at me. Playful and hot and rippling with muscles. Oh hell yes, he could count me in.

The climb down out of the truck bed prodded me to ask again how we had even gotten up there, but he promised to explain later. He also promised to show me the piece of paper that proclaimed him disease-free. I could ditch the party and return home with him if I wanted to see it immediately. I trusted him, seeing it wasn't necessary. I had one he could look at when we got back to my apartment, but he assured me that it, too, wasn't necessary. He knew I was the picture of health.

“How do you know?” I asked him.

He inhaled deeply. “I can smell it.”

“Really? What else do you smell?”

“My seed on you,” he said, his voice deep and husky, sending a flare of heat through me. “My sweat... I like it.”

I stared at him, and he stepped in close, tipping my head back, staring down into my eyes.

“I would have never hoped that such a beautiful creature would want me.” The man had obviously gotten us confused. I was just average; he was the god. “I have never seen such warm eyes, and the color... mahogany with chips of gold—they are exquisite, as is the man.”

I would have said something, told him that brown eyes, brown hair, and a long, lanky frame were not the ideal—that his carved, rippling, physique was. He was mouth-watering,

and I was forgettable, but the way he was looking at me made my mouth go dry.

“Mason,” he said, his breath ghosting across my face before he bent and sealed his mouth to mine.

His arms wrapped me up tight as his tongue sought entrance, and I parted my lips to allow myself to be devoured. It was tender and searing, and when I kissed him back, wrapping my arms around his neck, ravishing him, delivering a bruising kiss of my own, giving him all the passion he was giving me, I felt the shiver slide through his massive frame. He absolutely craved me, and there was no trepidation in the discovery, only a wave of happiness. When he pulled back, I followed, leaning into him.

“We need to get you home.” He smiled wickedly, but I could only nod. His eyes were slits. The curl at the side of his mouth and how disheveled he was made my heart hurt. The man was just the sexiest, most seductive thing I had ever seen in my whole life. He annihilated me. “You are a very strange man.”

I had been lost for a moment, staring at the laugh lines that crinkled in the corners of his eyes. “What?”

“You were so concerned the other night when you thought everyone was naked and yet just allowed me to put you over your truck here in the middle of a park.”

I had no response. He was right. My modesty seemed self-serving, to say the least. Standing there beside my truck, mouth open as he smacked my ass on the way to his motorcycle, I could only stare after him.

BACK at the apartment, I realized I had forgotten a few things, but I didn't really care. I wanted to talk to Luc. I needed to try and explain what had just happened between us, but he announced that he was going to run back to the store for me and left me on the sidewalk watching him ride away. I had to make a couple trips to bring everything in, but instead of hanging out in the kitchen to talk, I ducked back into my room. I needed a shower, and since I paid the most rent, I had my own bathroom.

Washing away sweat and semen made me feel grounded again. I was changed into corduroys and another T-shirt and back in the kitchen by the time Finn walked in the door followed by several of our friends. He was making the rounds of apartments and had returned to his own. His on-again-off-again boyfriend, Kevin Brooks, was right behind him with another man I didn't know.

"There you are." Kevin smiled at me, walking over and throwing an arm across my shoulders. "This is my buddy Mace that I wanted you to meet."

I wasn't sure what was going on, as Kevin and I had never been "buddies." I hated the way he treated Finn and never missed an opportunity to let him know.

"Mason James," Kevin said way too cheerfully, "this is my friend Andy Griggs from work. Andy this is Mace."

"Nice to meet you." Andy leered, looking me up and down, taking in my threadbare pants and the tight T-shirt that was molded to my abdomen.

"You too," I said, checking the door for Luc.

“Who are you—oh, you got laid!” Finn announced loudly.

I looked back at him, snorting out a laugh. “That was subtle.”

Finn fisted his hand in my T-shirt and yanked me forward out from under Kevin’s arm, drawing me away from the other two men. “When did you have time to fuck around?”

“Who fucked around?” Josh, another friend of ours, who I had not noticed putting beer in the refrigerator, asked from his crouch below me.

“Apparently Mace did,” Eli answered as he reached over Josh’s head for a beer.

“Oh yeah?” Josh stood up, closed the door, and turned around to lean on the counter. “When did you get lucky, FM?”

“FM?” I was confused.

“Freak magnet,” he clarified, tipping his head at Finn to give him the credit for the hideous nickname.

“Lovely.”

“Who’d you screw?” Finn pressed me.

“I—”

“I thought *I* was getting laid,” Andy chimed in, looking at Kevin. “You said hottie boy was mine.”

I shot Finn a look. Kevin had promised some stranger that he could screw me? He winced, forcing a smile that was overdone, all teeth. “Really?” I asked him.

“I thought you needed to get laid.” Finn defended himself.

When I glanced at Josh he just shook his head.

“Who’s hottie boy?” Eli asked, looking confused.

“Mace.”

He made a face. “Since when is Mace hot?”

“Just because you only do cavemen with too many muscles does not mean that Mason is not fine,” Finn assured him.

Eli groaned loudly. “I just don’t do skinny anything, and Mace... is... way... too—who’s that?” He pointed across the room.

In that moment I understood what it meant when people said someone could light up a room, because the man lit up my apartment just by walking in. His eyes, the way he moved, the play of muscles under his clothes and his smile... all of it seduced everyone who saw him.

Finn said, “Jesus God,” from where he stood beside me.

“Who does *that* belong to?” Eli asked me as he watched Luc cross the room toward us.

“Me,” I said, smiling at Luc as he came through the small crowd to the kitchen where I still was. “Hey, you made it.”

“Yes, finally.” He smiled wide, his eyes full of me. “You didn’t tell me that your neighborhood store had one line and the lady running the register was a hundred.”

I nodded. “You were supposed to go left to the supermarket instead.”

“I see.” He grinned at me. “I was supposed to read your mind.”

I chuckled, and he moved closer to me.

“Here, lemme help you with that,” Finn offered, reaching for one of the twelve packs under his arms. Luc had bags hanging from his hands, but he didn’t seem all that anxious to put anything down.

“Thanks.” He smiled, and I watched Finn catch his breath. It was fun to see my friend so flustered.

“Christ, this is heavy,” he complained, passing some of the bags to Kevin.

“This is a lot of stuff,” Eli said as he walked into the kitchen. “Thanks, um....”

“Luc,” he said, reaching out, offering my roommate his hand.

They all took turns shaking, even Andy, who could not stop his eyes from roaming all over my date. Eli, Finn, Kevin, and Josh were far more subtle.

“What do we owe you, Luc?”

“*He owes me,*” he said, walking forward so I had to backpedal until I hit the wall. When I did, I looked up at him. He was staring down into my eyes, and there was heat there and a smug possessiveness. He was acting like he owned me, and I felt the flutter in my stomach. “You smell good.”

I took a trembling breath as his fingers slid up my throat. “Come with me.”

He nodded, and I grabbed his hand, pulling him behind me. I didn’t even dare look at my friends. I just led him

through the crowd to my bedroom and shoved him through the open door, closing it behind him.

“No food for me, just more fucking?”

I crossed my arms, staring at him. “Is that all we did?”

“Forgive me.” He closed the distance between us fast, hands on my biceps. “I see that you are not ready to be teased.”

I nodded, staring up at his beautiful face. “I want to talk to you about what happened in the park.”

“I’m sorry. I made fun. Your inhibitions drowned under lust, and instead of letting that go, I brought attention to it. Forgive me.”

“No, it’s fine. I just didn’t want you to think I was a hypocrite or something, which I basically am, but I just—you were—”

“Perhaps I should go.”

He was giving me the out so I wouldn’t be embarrassed. It was really nice of him. I was going to tell him that I didn’t want him to go anywhere, but when he took a step back he winced.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I just... I’m a construction foreman, and yesterday we had an accident on site and... the piece that fell was larger than I thought—heavier—and so when I caught it I—”

“You caught something that fell on you?” I was stunned.

“A beam that would have crushed one of my crew,” he said as he reached out to move a piece of hair out of my eyes, “but yes.”

“So you’re not dead. You just strained your muscles catching it?”

“Yes.”

“So how big was this beam?”

“Not big,” he said quickly, and I got the feeling I was being placated.

“You want me to rub your back?”

He looked skeptical.

“What?” I smiled at him, walking slowly over to the bed. “Do you?”

He reached back between his shoulder blades and pulled his shirt off over his head.

I stifled the low sound of appreciation as my eyes trailed over the sculpted pectorals, rippling abs, bulging biceps, triceps, and all the chiseled lines of the man. “God, you’re beautiful.”

There was a snort of disgust as he stretched out face down on my bed.

“You are,” I insisted, crossing to my bed, standing over him.

“Get to it, slave.”

*Slave?*

“Please.”

The softened request made me smile, and I took full advantage and crawled over his legs and straddled his ass. He sighed deeply when my hands touched his skin, kneading his shoulders, my hands sliding down his back to right

above his tailbone. I massaged hard but found myself stroking his skin as well.

He made a sort of rumbling sound that was almost purring. I couldn't help but lean over and kiss a trail down his spine. When I quit almost an hour later, the soft snore was my reward for a job well done.

THE door opened without benefit of a knock, and Eli found me lying on my bed next to Luc, playing a video game.

"What are you doing?" he asked, standing in my doorway, scowling at me.

I gestured at the TV with controller. "Stealing cars."

"You're supposed to be out there with me and Finn."

I made a face. "This was not my party. It was yours and Finn's, and shut the hell up before you wake him."

He looked down at the man in my bed. "I can't believe that gorgeous man is lying in your bed."

I grunted, because even though Eli was my friend, he knew he was better-looking than me. That Luc had seen him but still chosen me was really grating on him. I couldn't even count the number of men Eli had taken from me over the years. Of course, once they had slept with me, it was a different story, but Eli didn't want them at that point anyway.

He leaned over to touch Luc's back.

"Don't," I warned him.

His eyes flicked to mine. “Are you kidding? This doesn’t belong to you.”

“He’s not a *this*, he’s Luc, and I’m asking you as my friend to lay off.”

His lip curled as he smiled smugly. I had never seen him like this, but I had always simply given in and backed off in the past. It was not worth the fight, because, if Eli with his perfect body and face wanted a man, he would get him. But it was different this time, and as I watched him run his fingers down Luc’s bare back, I felt my face get hot. I tossed away the controller and grabbed his wrist. When I pushed him back, it took him several steps to recover his balance.

“What the fuck!” he yelled at me as I came off the bed to confront him. “Where do you—?”

But his voice died in his throat as he focused on something over my shoulder. He caught his breath, then screamed into my face. I had never seen his blue eyes so wild, huge, and terrified.

I spun around, and Luc was standing there stark naked. I couldn’t breathe either. The man was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

“Ohmygod, Mason!” Eli yelled, clawing at my arm, trying to pull me toward the door.

“What are you doing?” I pivoted back to face my friend, tried to grab him, to steady him, seeing how frightened he looked, how hard he was shaking. “Calm down.”

He gave out a very girly shriek and shoved me away, frantic to get out of the room. I winced from the volume and how close he was to me when he did it. When he threw the

door open and ran, I slammed the door shut and locked it behind him. I could hear him shouting as he went down the hall. I let out a deep breath, and when I turned, Luc was there, standing over me.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured as I tilted my head back to look up into his face. His eyes were glassy and glittered bright green. “He’s just bein’ a dick. Are you okay? Did he startle you?”

He stared at me with feverish liquid eyes, saying nothing. I waited for some sign that he was all right, but there was nothing. He gazed at me, looking me up and down, and swallowed hard.

“Honey,” I said softly, putting my hands on his face, smiling up at him. “I think maybe you should put your clothes back on. I don’t want anyone else coming in here seeing you naked.”

The pounding on the door startled us both. His hands went to my upper arms and locked almost painfully.

“Yes?” I called over my shoulder.

“Mace?” I heard Finn call out. “Are you all right?”

“Fine.”

“Is Luc all right?” he asked playfully.

I chuckled. “Yes, Finn, he’s still alive.”

His soft laughter came through the door. “Okay. Eli is drunk, I think.”

“I think so too,” I agreed. “I’ll be out in a bit.”

“Take your time,” he cackled, and then I didn’t hear him anymore.

As soon as I looked up into Luc's face, he loosened his grip on me.

"I'm so sorry," I said gently. "If you want to leave, I complete—"

He shook his head.

His eyes were so beautiful, like melting jewels. I couldn't look away. "Eli is just jealous," I sighed, feeling his fingers stroke over my collarbone.

He grabbed me, pulled me up against him tight, and buried his face down in my shoulder. I started to tremble and wrapped my arms around his neck, and I hugged him back as hard as I could. I felt him shaking, and his breathing was like panting, fast and hard. My feet lifted off the ground as he straightened to his full height. He felt so good under my hands. When he bumped my chin with his nose, I lifted it so he could reach my throat, offering it up to him. He kissed and sucked and licked and bit, and I writhed in his arms because I wanted him to throw me down on the bed. I was ready to have him buried back inside me.

He slowly and deliberately threaded his fingers through my hair before yanking my head back so hard that I cried out. My heart was pounding, but I wasn't scared. My blood was racing too fast to even think. He licked my throat again, slowly and deliberately, and I felt my chest start to heave.

"Luc," I breathed out, loving the feel of him against me, his skin so hot and his body so hard. My mouth was on his throat, and I kissed everywhere I could reach. I wanted to devour him. I felt his hands tear at my clothes, and I saw the fabric rip as it was shredded to pieces. My breath caught as I was forced roughly down on the bed.

“You will look now and see me.”

“I don’t understand.”

But seconds later I did.

I had drawn only my sheer curtain across the window so it allowed moonlight into the room but let no one see in. Luc was framed in a silvery glow as wings spread from his back, unfurling, causing a faint stir of air in the room. The wings resembled those of a bat except they were enormous and looked like they were made of glossy patent leather. The horns that grew out of each side of his head were black as well, thick and curling, shining like carved onyx, resembling those of a ram. His features were blunt, rough, not the chiseled perfection that his face was when he was a man. Only his eyes were the same, glowing now in his face, locked on me. When he opened his mouth, the tongue of a snake flicked out, long and forked. When he turned his head and blew out a breath there was a small spiral of flame.

“You breathe fire.” I smiled at him. “And I’m a fireman—how cool is that?”

There were heartbeats of silence that passed.

“Do you see me?”

“Obviously,” I teased him.

“Are you certain?”

I nodded, wondering what his forked tongue would feel like when I kissed him, what it would feel like slithering deep inside me.

“I am a *goji*, a gargoyle, and this blood flows through your veins as well.”

“Oh yeah,” I said, twisting free of his grip, rolling over to my nightstand to retrieve the lube. “Cool.”

“Mason!”

I got the drawer open and grabbed the tube before I wriggled back down to the end of the bed. “Saliva’s great, but this is better.”

It was funny to see a huge, frightening creature look so dumbfounded.

“What?” I asked.

“I am a gargoyle! This is what terrified your friend Eli just minutes ago.”

“Yeah, I got that,” I said, opening the cap of the lube, pouring a small amount into my left palm and licking my lips, unable not to. Just the sight of the man’s heavy cock with beads of pearly liquid dripping from the tip was enough to make me hot. “How come?”

“I don’t understand the—”

“I never saw you looking like this before, but Eli did right off? I don’t get that.”

“He... you... you are a Romanus. You are not like other men. You only see after you are joined with another of your own kind.”

“So what you’re saying is that sex turned this on?”

“What? No, not—”

“So that’s why I thought everyone was naked the other night. They all had wings like you do now.”

He nodded, clearly trying to think of something to say.

“And I’m guessing gargoyles don’t get diseases, so that’s why you told me you were clean.”

“Yes, we... we cannot catch any—”

“Come closer,” I demanded.

“Why aren’t you afraid?”

I had no answer for him. I should have been shocked and horrified or become an instant candidate for a padded room, but the feelings of home, rightness, safety, and peace were roaring through my head and my heart, and there was a throbbing, aching, breathing part of me that wanted to make the man mine. He needed to be mine.

When he took a step closer, I fisted his engorged shaft, sliding my hand over it from head to balls, coating it thoroughly.

His hoarse moan made me smile.

“Mason,” his voice was full of gravel, “you astound me.”

“Why?”

“I am a beast... you have joined with a beast.”

I wrapped my legs around his lean waist. “I wanna be joined again.”

“You should be terrified.”

I could never be scared of Luc Toussaint. Ache with need for him, yes, fear him, no.

He unlocked my legs, kissing each calf before he lifted them up over his shoulders and leaned forward.

“By joining with me now, you will agree to be bound to me until I take my last breath.”

“Nuh-uh.” I smiled up at him. “But we can date and see where it goes.” There were so many emotions running across his face at once, uncertainty leading the way. “I want to learn everything there is to know about you, and for that we need time. Will you give that to me?”

His smile let me see the extended canines. “Agreed.”

Everything in me calmed all at once, like a breath I’d been holding all my life was slowly released, leaving only a feeling of absolute peace.

The head of his cock pressed to the entrance of my fluttering hole. “You are Romanus, the first *seer* my chasse, our clan, has ever been blessed with. We live in the shadows, spread wings only at night, but now, with you, with your acceptance, you will show us to others, help us find some to trust, and we will find peace in the word of men.”

I caught my breath as he eased his swollen length inside me, the slow deep slide letting me feel every inch as he filled me. He breathed my name, a shudder running through him. I writhed under him, arching up as he increased his rhythm, meeting his strokes, absorbing them. He shifted his stance, one hand on my hip, anchoring me, the other closing around my aching, needy shaft. As he began to jerk me off, matching the thrusts of his body plunging down into mine, I felt the sizzling heat infusing my body.

“You’re so tight, so hot. I feel your desire for me,” he growled as he thrust deep, impaling me, nailing my prostate and sending a flood of pleasure through me. “Promise that your body, if not your soul, is only mine.”

“Yours,” I got out before splinters of ecstasy raced through my veins, bowing my back, making me yell his name as I found my release, splattering his abdomen with come.

His head fell back as he fucked me through my orgasm, and when he roared my name, flooding my clenching channel with heat, I reached up for him, pulling him down for a kiss.

The kiss was ravishing. I missed nothing and wrapped my arms around his neck, making sure he couldn't get away. I felt the long, thin tongue coil around mine, mate with mine, and draw me deep into his hot mouth. I kissed him hard, whimpering in the back of my throat, needing to be closer, wriggling my ass on his still-engorged shaft, my legs wrapped tight around his waist.

He tore his lips from mine, panting, taking gulping breaths of air. “Swear to me that there will be no other in your bed.”

I smiled up at him. He needed the words. He had to know there was only him. The creature in him had to have that piece of me, the physical piece to begin. “I swear.”

My promise, joyfully given, was the last part he needed to unwind his tightly held control. He collapsed on top of me.

I laughed softly, clutching him tight. I had a gargoyle in my bed, but did I care? Truthfully? I didn't. My capacity for weird had always been high, and suddenly, if everything the man had said was true, there was a good reason for that. If I had *goji*—gargoyle—blood in me, then it made sense that it would take another gargoyle to satisfy me.

“What are you thinking?” he asked as he rose over me, easing gently from my body.

“How come when I sleep with other guys they wanna keep me?”

“Your pheromones,” he sighed, staring down into my eyes. “To humans you are intoxicating once you share a kiss or more.”

“But not to other *goji*.”

“With your own kind you do not have to fear obsession. You can be yourself.”

It was a relief to hear.

“Sex with one who is not *goji* is not for you.”

I had to smile at his phrasing.

“What?”

“You already have my promise that I won’t be sleeping with anybody else.”

“I didn’t say what I did just to—”

“I know,” I assured him. “You’re not the type to say things just to get what you want.”

“You truly believe that?”

“Of course.”

We were silent, just our eyes locked together.

“Speak the words to me again.”

“What words? That it’s just you and me from right now?”

“Yes,” he exhaled.

“Consider them said.”

“You are all I want.”

“Good, me too.” I smiled at him. “What do you want to do tomorrow?”

His eyes sparkled, and his smile was wide. “Stay in bed with you.”

My stomach flipped over. “Okay.”

“How do you simply accept this new truth of our existence so easily?”

“Seeing is believing.” I gestured at him. “But at some point we’ll have to figure out how I managed to have gargoyle blood in me and never know it. I doubt my adopted parents knew, but maybe I’m wrong and they did. I haven’t gone through any of their stuff since they died, but maybe in their papers—if I can find my adoption records—there’ll be some answers.”

“Perhaps,” he agreed solemnly.

“But for now, I’ll take this on faith, because here you are in front of me. I know what I couldn’t see before, and I know I can only see you now because we’re more than just lovers, so... this is me. I’m a pretty steady guy.”

“You are the most amazing and most beautiful man I have ever seen,” he exhaled deeply.

“Don’t suck up,” I said, rising, waggling my eyebrows at him. “Can I touch the wings?”

He stepped back from the bed and spread his shiny black wings wide, making a stunning vision framed in the light from my window. “I am yours to do with as you will.”

I walked around him, marveling at the fragile finger-like bones in the wings, the way they attached to his shoulder blades, simply extensions, all of it natural and right.

Running my hands over his wings prompted Luc to release a deep moan.

“Do we have an erogenous zone here, Mr. Toussaint?”

My answer was the shiver that ran through his massive frame.

“Why did you change when you woke up?” I asked, continuing my inspection, my fingers tracing over him making him tremble.

“I fell asleep easily because I trust you, and I was so content with your hands on my skin and you were petting me and... and then you were angry, and I felt it like a knife, and I tried so hard not to change, but there was no way that...” He put his hands on my hips, held me gently but firmly. “And you didn’t see me.”

I scowled at him. “Well, I’m glad Eli saw you in your gargoyle state and not naked. I don’t want anyone but me to see you naked from now on.”

He shook his head. “It is beyond imagining that you would be possessive of me.”

I put my hands on his face. “Who filled your head with the idea that you’re not gorgeous? Because whoever it was totally mind-fucked you.”

“I am a *leon*, a lion, a soldier of the Rouen—our leader, of Raoul Orane that you met. Normally a Romanus would never take a simple soldier for a mate, but now that you have chosen, you cannot deny me.”

“I’m not your mate,” I corrected him.

“You said that there would only be me.”

“Because we’re going to date and see how this works with us,” I reminded him. “Isn’t that what we both agreed on?”

“You chose me, did you not?”

“Yes,” I sighed, “to spend time with and—”

“There will be others that will want you, but you have chosen me. This is what I meant. You cannot choose another.”

“Okay.”

“Would it be so bad to belong to me? Do you fear it so deeply?”

“I’m not afraid one bit, and I’m excited to see where this goes, but we go slowly or we don’t go at all.”

There was a long silence as he looked at me, into my eyes.

“You have such sweet eyes... kind eyes.”

I smiled at him. “Don’t change the subject.”

“Slow it is,” he agreed, his fingers sliding over my jaw. “Amazing.”

“What’s that?” I was having trouble concentrating.

The muscles in his jaw corded. “You could have any in the chasse you found favorable.”

“You’re the only one I want.”

“Which is astounding,” he breathed out.

“Why?”

“Because you are the Romanus.”

“And what’s so great about that, anyway?”

His eyes searched mine. “All others have wings, and we must shift daily to our gargoyle form and fly. If we do not, we go mad.”

“Okay.”

“But you are *goji*, but do not shift. You are both man and gargoyle at the same time.”

“I would love to be able to fly.”

He took a sharp, steadying breath. “I will take you.”

“That sounds good,” I said, leaning in to kiss him. His tongue flicked across the seam of my lips, slithering between them, tasting me. I pressed my groin to his thigh, rubbing against him, moaning into his hot, wet mouth.

He pulled back, staring down into my eyes. “I do not think I can be parted from you. To ask me to sleep anywhere but in your bed fills me with dread.”

“You can sleep with me whenever you like,” I assured him as he eased out of my arms, walking around the bed.

He nodded, folding his wings behind him, and when he landed face down on the bed, they were gone.

“How do you do that?”

“I draw them inside me.”

“It’s the coolest thing I ever saw in my life.”

His deep rumbling chuckle went straight to my cock. I was falling for the man so hard, so fast. I would be good and drowned by morning, no matter what I was telling him or myself. Climbing onto the bed, I crawled over to him, bending to kiss my way down his spine.

“I will end up doing all you ask just for your touch... I must be careful to not become your slave.”

“It’s okay,” I confessed. “I think I’m gonna be in the same boat.”

SHUFFLING out of bed hours later, I walked to the kitchen to make something for Luc and me to eat. If hunger pains had woken me from a sated sleep, then a big scary gargoyle had to be starving.

“Mace?”

Turning, I found Finn blinking and squinting at the light.

“Hey.” I smiled at him.

“Eli’s an ass,” he assured me, closing the distance between us, hand on my bare shoulder. “And guess who he left with?”

I scowled at him.

“Oh yeah, Kevin,” he sighed heavily, “and his friend Andy from work. I think they were off to get their kink on.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I said irritably. “Your boyfriend is sleeping with your roommate now? Jesus Christ, Finn, is that what you really want? He’s with you when he wants. He leaves when he wants. How open is this relationship gonna get before you tell him to go to hell?”

He nodded, smiling at me. “This is it, I think. I mean he’s over at his place fucking Eli and Andy, and I’m here all—”

We both heard glass shatter at the same time.

“What the hell?” Finn snapped, leaving me alone in the kitchen before I could even register what was going on.

I came around the corner fast, knowing, just like my friend did, that the sound was coming from the fire escape. What I didn’t know was that he had stopped, frozen, which made it impossible for me not to plow into him.

He absorbed me colliding with his back, and when I regained my balance, I leaned around him in time to see the wings. Dark black wings opened, blocking out the moonlight, and I saw teeth, fangs, impossibly long, jaws open grotesquely wide as though they were unhinged.

“Oh shit,” Finn said under his breath, shaking hard, panting. “I owe Eli an apology.”

“Run,” I told him. “Run now.”

“You... with me,” he managed to get out, even though he sounded like he was about to start hyperventilating.

I had never had any brothers or sisters, but my friends were amazing. At the moment where his sanity should have cracked, my friend Finn Garrett was not going without me. Really, what more could I have asked for?

“Go get Luc,” I told him. “Run.”

He turned to look at me.

“Run!”

He bolted toward my bedroom, and I had a moment to turn before I felt hot breath on my face, and I looked up and saw teeth before claws, and then pain that took my breath and then my sight.

### IV

IN EVERY culture there are fanatics, zealots, people who want things to stay the same, who like their lives just the way they are, and who deeply fear change. A Romanus, I was made to understand, is an instrument of transition. A chasse, or clan, of gargoyles goes from isolation to branching out and creating ties with at first very select individuals and then an ever-widening circle. To some members of the group, trusting others, inviting others into their world, exposing themselves, is terrifying. To a small fraction of the chasse, the idea was even more than just scary, it was blasphemous. Those people were led by Ciprien Boyer.

Ciprien was the man who a militant few felt should have been Rouen after Fabron Chaloner. But each family in the chasse had been given one vote, and when the final tally had been taken, Raoul Orane had been named the new leader instead. This had come as a surprise to the man who wanted to take the chasse and return to France, there to merge with another older group he felt would instill old-world values in this one. The coming of me, the Romanus, had been a sign to almost the entire group that their choice of Raoul was destined by God.

“Now do you understand my anger?” the gargoyle roared at me from where he stood above me on the bridge.

“Yes,” I gasped, spitting out the creek water as I took another heaving breath.

He had been lecturing me, explaining to me why I was an abomination as he turned the wheel and submerged me under water for longer and longer periods of time. He was trying to make me understand why he was going to kill me.

“If you live, you will destroy us all.”

“I just want to help,” I assured him, having ceased struggling a half an hour ago. Lashed to a water wheel, even though with my constant struggling the ropes were loosening, I was tiring. I knew about knots, had tied enough in my lifetime in my job and out, and the rope was too thick to make a tight one. Bound sloppily, carelessly, I had wiggle room. Already my right wrist was loose, although I wasn’t letting him know that. I just needed more time to get my left free as well. And I needed my lungs to hold out.

I would have bet on my lungs. I had a great set. Firemen did. It was all part and parcel of the whole breath-holding-as-you-run-into-burning-buildings gig, but still... there was no end in sight, and with each turn of the wheel, he cut off my air for longer periods of time. I was choking and coughing, my chest burning, screaming for oxygen before I was lifted from liquid death the last time. It took forever to get my ears to stop ringing and my head to quit pounding. Worst of all, I was going in upside down, into a creek that had gone from skinny-dipping comfort to icy cold by the fifth turn of the wheel. I wouldn’t make it out one more time. I was too tired, and he was done preaching. We were both ready to end it.

“You are vile and unclean, Romanus. To lie with a man is an abomination.”

“Love is a gift.” I took a deep steadying breath. “In whatever form, love is a gift. If you were loved at all, you’d understand.”

When I rolled my head to the side, I saw that his wings were now spread wide above me. His hands had contorted into long sharp talons as he leaned forward slightly and was suddenly inches from my face. The movement was lost to my eye, and because of that, because I wouldn’t know until it was over that I had been eviscerated, I was terrified.

“Please,” I begged him, and not just for me. There were people who needed me, and I was startled, even when my eyes suddenly swimming with tears, that the face that came instantly to my mind was Luc’s. We had just begun. I wasn’t ready to end.

Ciprien’s face elongated, his neck jerking left and then right, inhumanly fast, twisting, his jaw distending horribly, grotesquely, making room for fangs that did not belong in the mouth of a human being. The first slash across my chest seared through me, and there was heat as he raised a blackened claw to his lips. The blood dripped from the razor sharp tips.

“You have come to destroy us all,” he told me.

“It was an accident that I found you at all,” I assured him. “But Luc said I could help—he said I was supposed to. He said that’s what a Romanus did... they help.”

I watched him struggle, his body finally shaking with the strain of his decision as he turned suddenly, shouting,

and I felt the wheel slip forward. I struggled hard even as I inched slowly toward the water.

There was no will to fight once I was submerged again, the cold chilling me, and I thought about taking one big gulp of water. I contemplated it up until I shivered hard, jerking against my restraints and feeling them give. The knotted ropes that had been haphazardly tied—there simply to keep me in place—were now loose enough for me to free my left wrist. I pulled and yanked, peeling off some of my skin, but the pain was of no consequence. Only freedom mattered.

With two hands loose, my feet were next. Never had he anticipated me getting the first hand untied. He had no contingency plan. And it felt like I had an hour under the water, but really, it was only seconds, because it was all the air I had. People say that in grave danger your whole life flashes in front of your eyes. For me the opposite was true: time stood completely still.

Kicking out, I floated up, breaking the surface, bobbing back under, and then I drifted a few feet away before lifting again. The air I sucked into my lungs made me sputter and cough even as I heard the howl of rage. I had small wrists for a man, and the rope had only cut off my circulation in one hand. It was just plain dumb luck—no other explanation need apply.

“Romanus!”

I took a gulp of air and swam as though my life depended on it, which I was fairly certain it did. It wasn't graceful. I was a strong swimmer, but there was no artistry in it. When I felt the wind on the surface of the water, I pulled up in time for him to miss me. Ciprien dove deep in

front of me, but I didn't stay still and wait for the second attack; I swam again for my life. When I felt the claw rake down my back, I spun around and launched myself at him without a thought. It was him or me. He wanted me dead, but now that I was free, I could fight.

Wings in the water were a hindrance, not a help. He was stronger, but in the water he was no faster. I punched him in the face, steadily splashed him so he couldn't see, and finally lifted up enough to drag him under. Flipping over I got behind him and managed to wrap my arm around his neck, the sleeper hold cutting off his air as we bobbed to the surface before submerging once more. He thrashed and bucked, and claws tore into my shoulders, but the pressure I was exerting was more than he realized, and in seconds I felt him go limp in my grip.

Kicking to the surface, I drank in the air, gagging, coughing up what I had swallowed of the creek, heaving as I dragged him with me through what felt heavy, like caramel, instead of icy pre-dawn water. He convulsed in my arms as I beached us, retching and choking, and I turned my head so I wouldn't see him vomit. It was only water, but still, I didn't need to see it. Hearing it was enough.

I jolted when I felt the hands on me, looking up to see the other men who had been with him on the small pier.

"I saved your life," I coughed, turning to look at the quaking gargoyle, thinking he would spare me as I had him.

"And that makes you a fool," he passed judgment, and only then did I see the knife above me. It was curved, gleaming in the moonlight, the light running the length of the blade.

I thought to lift up, to reach for the hilt, to wrestle it free, but my energy was gone, I was losing blood, and my vision was getting dim. My right arm buckled, and I crashed down on my side, hitting the dirt hard. Rolling to my side, I saw the knife slice toward me and caught the man's wrist with both hands. It was a losing battle. As the dagger neared my throat, I heard the growl, loud and menacing.

Any other time the savage sound would have scared me to death or sent a shiver of dread down my spine, but my attacker was hurled off me, and so I could be nothing but thankful as I fell back onto the wet earth.

"Mason," Luc exhaled as he bent over me, lifting me gently into his arms, into his lap.

I reached up to touch his face, his and not at the same time. I had wanted to feel the horns earlier, and so I traced the right one with my fingertips. "It's cold, like marble."

"You're cold," he observed, worry etched on his now blunt features.

"My shoulders are shredded I think." I swallowed, my mouth so dry. "I feel a little lightheaded like maybe I lost some—"

"Open your eyes," he commanded me.

My eyes were closed?

"Mace," he urged me, shaking me gently.

But he was so warm, and I was suddenly freezing. There were sounds of fighting around us but nestled against his body, I felt the drop like an elevator, and his voice became a whisper before it was gone.

V

MY EYES fluttered open, and I saw Luc pacing in front of a window that looked out on a wide open meadow. The day was overcast, odd for summer, but calming, like sunshine would have been glaring. I had no idea where I was, but it was okay because he was there. Just seeing him soothed me.

“Hey,” I whispered. “Where am I?”

He reacted like I had yelled, turning fast, staring a second before he crossed to the bed, his hands all over me, my hair, my face, his breath shaky and uneven.

“Luc?”

“You’re awake,” he exhaled sharply, “finally.”

“How long have I—?”

“Hours,” he said, and I watched a slight shudder eat through him.

I reached for one of his restless hands and flattened the palm on my cheek, leaning into the warmth. “I’m okay now.”

“Yes.” He forced a smile for me. “And so is your friend Finn. He’s here up at the main house with Raoul.”

“Oh shit.” I tried to sit up, but he held me immobile with just one hand on my abdomen.

“It’s all right. He’s fine.” He gave me a lopsided grin. “He’s taking it all very well, and he and Raoul are bonding.”

The way he talked about the two men, I looked up at him.

He shrugged. “I don’t—he seems really at ease, your friend. Does he ever stop talking?”

“Finn must like him... Raoul, I mean. If he’s talking a lot, that’s how you can tell.”

“Well, I thought Raoul would be really....” He thought a minute. “I don’t know, but they’re sitting there, have been for hours... anyway, it’s fine. I don’t care. I’m just glad everyone’s there, and I get to be here, alone with you, in my house.”

I smiled at him. “What happened?”

“You lost a lot of blood, but you’re strong. A Romanus always is, and so you’ve healed yourself. You just needed me close. My pheromones triggered your healing, my beast calling to yours.”

“Your beast calls to mine?” I asked. “But I don’t shift. I don’t have wings.”

“But the blood is the same, and therefore, so is the call.”

“Any gargoyle could call my beast?” I was skeptical.

He squinted at me. “I had thought so, but no. Others were here. Raoul himself came to take you from me, but the minute he did, you were in pain, so....” He trailed off, the memory obviously hard for him. “I was allowed to reclaim you.”

“So what does that mean?”

“You know what it means.” His voice was hoarse with feeling.

“That maybe it’s good that we’re giving this thing with us a try.” He nodded, and I saw how raw his eyes looked. “You were worried.” I smiled up at him.

“Yes.” His voice cracked.

“Lie down with me,” I said, lifting the thin sheet I was under. He moved fast to join me, and when I wrapped myself around him, I heard the deep release of contented breath. “Now I’ve got you,” I announced gently. “You’re mine now.”

“Absolutely yours,” he assured me, his lips brushing over my forehead, his voice deep and growly.

I slid a hand under the T-shirt he was wearing, and his breath caught. “Is Ciprien dead?”

“No, he and the others were banished.”

“They’ll probably be back, and they’ll be really mad.”

“That is a worry for another day,” he said, a noise coming from the back of his throat as he twisted beside me.

“What’re you doing?”

“I need to get up and get you food and water.”

I rolled over on top of him, pinning him under me to the bed. I had thought my head would hurt when I sat up, but I was fine. Apparently with him around I healed up quite nicely. “Stay where you are.”

His arms wrapped around me tight. “I love you warm and naked in my bed.”

“I love it too,” I breathed down the side of his neck.

I heard a rumbling chuckle from him. “Yes, I can tell.”

Since I was naked it was easy to discern. “Don’t be so smug.”

“Very soon you will give me the words I crave,” he said, lifting my chin for a kiss.

“What words are those?”

“That you love me.”

“What?” I asked quickly as my mouth went dry.

He pushed me sideways down on the bed and raised himself over me, looking down into my face. “You aren’t ready to speak your heart to me, and that’s all right.” He smiled before he leaned toward me, his mouth hovering over mine. “I’ll wait. I’m a patient man.”

When he kissed me, I moaned into his mouth, his taste, his heat, all of it already needed, wanted. I was stumbling toward the abyss, and we both knew it.

“You’re supposed to be with me forever,” he assured me when he pulled back, both of us panting for breath.

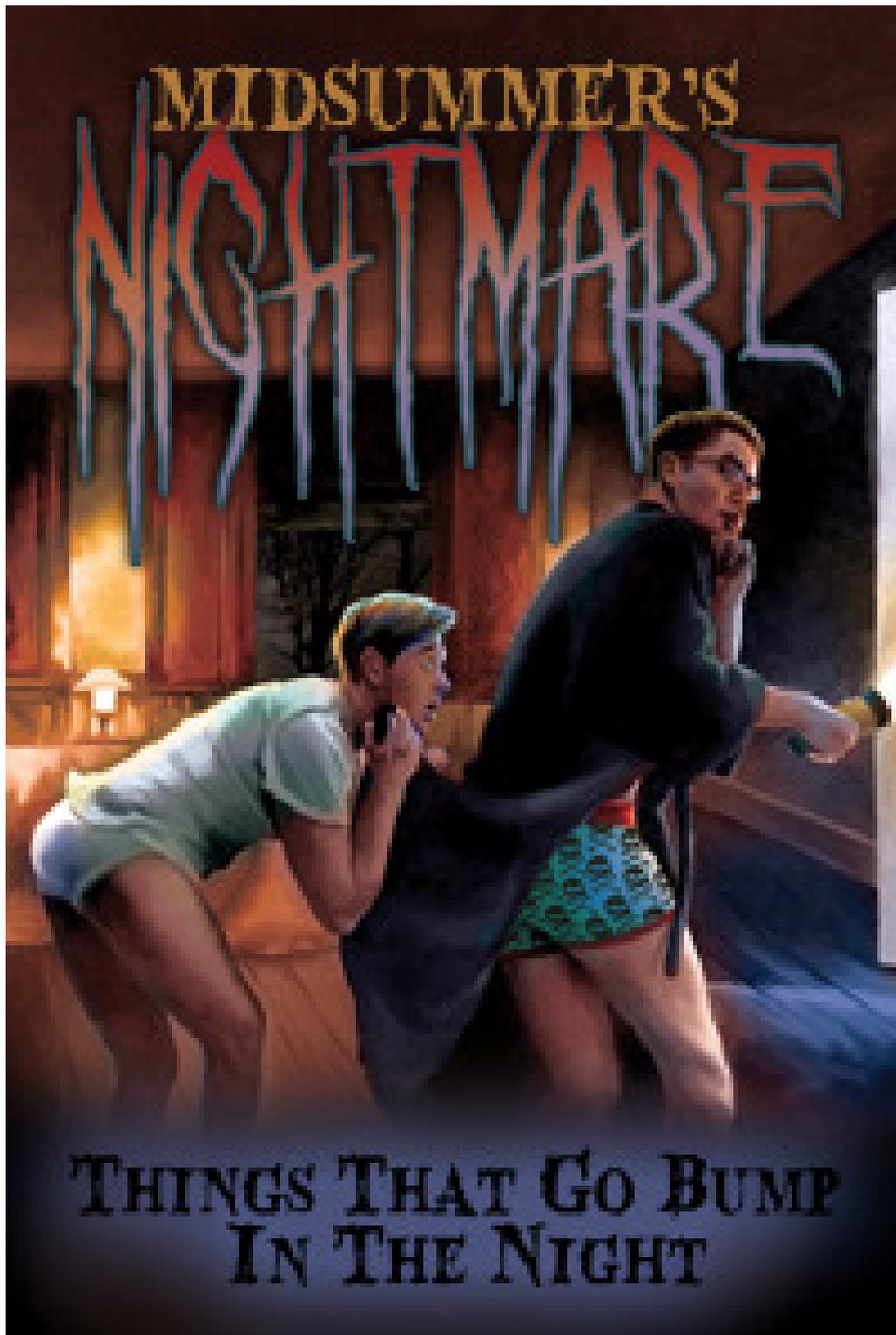
“Forever’s a long time,” I sighed heavily.

“If we’re lucky,” he agreed, sinking over me.

I lifted my legs, wrapping them around his lean waist, my arms drawing him closer, tighter. “God, I’m crazy about you.”

“Which is only the beginning,” he said as his lips reclaimed mine.

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Published by  
Dreamspinner Press  
4760 Preston Road  
Suite 244-149  
Frisco, TX 75034  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Released in the United States of America  
June 2010

eBook Edition  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-500-5